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## PRESS RELEASE

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### **THE PRECISIONIST AESTHETIC IN AMERICAN ART** **January 24 - April 9, 1989**

An exhibition of sixty paintings, drawings, prints, sculpture, and photographs, under the title **The Precisionist Aesthetic in American Art**, will open at The Cleveland Museum of Art on January 24, 1989 and remain on view until April 9, 1989. Drawing from the Museum's collections and from the Western Reserve Historical Society, the exhibition presents a variety of works never before seen together to demonstrate that the major movement of American art in the 1920s--the movement later called "Precisionism"--affected all the arts as it attempted to give visual form to an aesthetic based on indigenous American culture.

The indigenous culture was anything but homogeneous: it embraced cities bursting at the seams, vast stretches of farmland, huge pieces of machinery, and unadorned furniture. All these had in common, the artists believed, simplicity, economy, and functionalism, which were considered "native" American values. Further, in whatever medium they worked, the artists rendered their subjects with surfaces that were so "unpainterly" that they implicitly denied sensuality and luxury. The artists' attempts to simplify, clarify, and purify the scenes they saw around them--and their responses to them--resulted in extremely rational, orderly images.

Subjects that are reduced to their basic geometric shapes and defined by sharp, precise edges could logically be seen as influenced by Cubism, the potent and inventive effort to analyze and abstract forms pioneered by Picasso and Braque in Europe. But the American artists insisted they were working in a native American fashion, much

like that of early American painters. It is true that the American artists, however much they simplified and flattened forms or distorted perspective, remained faithful to their subject matter, keeping it recognizable and keeping their work representational.

A centerpiece of the exhibition is the 1920 painting by Charles Sheeler, Church Street El, one of his finest early Precisionist paintings, which entered the Cleveland Museum collection in 1977. It is based on a frame from the short film, Manhatta, that Sheeler and the photographer Paul Strand made of New York after World War I. Its images of the elevated trains and skyscrapers of midtown Manhattan were taken from the top of the Empire State Building, and these extremely high, eccentric viewing angles, in both the painting and the film, focused attention on abstract patterns of light and form. In the painting Sheeler reduced forms to flat planes, rendered with razor-sharp lines characteristic of his impersonal, machinelike technique.

The purity of expression Sheeler sought in his work was similar to the qualities he found "moving and exalted" in the aesthetic of the Shakers, a sect (properly called the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Coming) that took as its motto "Hands to Work and Hearts to God." The Shakers developed a tradition of beautifully designed, finely crafted furniture and household objects, all characterized by a simple clarity of purpose and form. Sheeler avidly collected Shaker arts and craft, such as the child's high chair, made of wood and wicker, and the Pembroke table of cherry, walnut, and pine, which are among the examples in the exhibition.

Other than Sheeler, probably the foremost Precisionist, artists whose works are exhibited include Georgia O'Keeffe, Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Edward Weston. Their images range from Weston's photograph of a

plain wooden church in New Mexico, to O'Keeffe's painting, "Morning Glory with Black," to Strand's 1923 photograph of a gleaming, calibrated lathe in a machine shop.

Anne S. Babcock, curatorial assistant in the Department of Prints and Drawings, and William H. Robinson, curatorial assistant in the Department of Modern Art, organized the exhibition. It will be exhibited in the Prints and Drawings galleries.

The film, Manhatta, will be shown once only, at 7:45 pm on Wednesday, January 25, as part of the "Documentaries" film series.

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